

Presentation of “Black Racial Democracy in the 1940’s”¹

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First of all, my thanks to the organizers of this conference on the “Culture and the State in the Lusophone Black Atlantic” - Nancy Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca, and David Treece - for the opportunity to meet and discuss with distinguished colleagues of different specialties.

I brought for discussion a paper on Black Racial Democracy in the 1940’s, which I wrote with Márcio Macedo, a student of mine in the Graduate Program in Sociology at the Universidade de São Paulo. In the paper, Márcio and I pursue the view that racial democracy was not a mere illusion or a simple device of White supremacy in Brazil, as some people have recently come to believe. We show in this article the active participation of Black leaders in the representation of the Brazilian nation in the 1940’s. We show also that racial democracy was in the 1940’s a very strong ideology of mobilization of Blacks both as Brazilian nationalists and as anti-racist activists.

Our empirical source is a section in the populist newspaper “Diário Trabalhista”, entitled “Problems and Aspirations of Black Brazilians”, published from 1946 to 1948 by a key figure of the Brazilian Black intelligentsia – Abdias do Nascimento - with the assistance of three other collaborators: Sebastião Rodrigues Alves, Ironides Rodrigues e Aginaldo Camargo. Those men decided in 1946 to organize a public inquiry on the problems faced by Black people in Brazil, asking two main questions: First, “What are the problems of the Black people?”, and secondly “is there racial discrimination in Brazil?”. Their goal was obviously to construct a political diagnosis of the actual barriers for the advancement of black people at this time and thus influence the elected National Constituent Assembly to pass laws to destroy those barriers. During 1946 they regularly published in their newspaper’s section forty interviews with political leaders, artists, and intellectuals, both Blacks and white sympathizers of the Black cause.

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In order to clarify the context in which this initiative took place and its consequences for the forging of a renewed national compromise on the character of Brazilian democracy, we organized the paper in seven main topics: 1) we introduce the reader to the historic context of the 1930's and 1940's stressing what ideas and ideologies were blooming in the Black protesters' milieu; 2) we introduce our four journalists and their personal cultural and political views; 3) we put forth the main ideas expressed by the Black intellectuals interviewed by the journalists; 4) we scrutinize the views expressed by common Black people or Black artists of minor visibility; 5) we look more closely at the views and attitudes of white politicians towards the Black movement; 6) we discuss the views of white artists and intellectuals who expressed sympathy with the Black protest; 7) finally we conclude by summarizing the ideas and political strategies open to the Black movement of the time and by critically assessing their choices.

I cannot follow this plan in my own exposition today. It would take too much time. Instead I will emphasize the ideas and ideologies, the fusion of which can be understood as a Black discourse on racial democracy emerging in this decade. Let me then begin by sketching the historical and ideological context of the 1940's.

Ideas and ideologies in the Black movement's milieu

After the Abolition of Slavery (1888) and the proclamation of the Republic of 1889 we can count numerous contradictory but important ideas freely circulated among Black activists and intellectuals in Brazil. Some of these should retain our attention since they have continued importance in Black politics. They have been repeated insistently by Black intellectuals and commoners since the 1930's.

One of these ideas was masterly exposed by Mário de Andrade in a short paper entitled "The Superstition of Color". To summarize Mário, he says succinctly this: color would be a common and minor characteristic of human beings if the color black were not the subject of intense superstition by all human civilizations, always associated with darkness and evil things. As a result Black men and women suffer from the ignorance and superstition against their color at all times in all cultures. Only education could probably put an end to this superstition. Color is but an accident in a man's life. This idea is still

influential in Brazil but in the 1940's it had much more vigor than now. At that time the dictum "color is but an accident" was of common currency.

Another very influential idea was best expressed in its liberal version by Donald Pierson, an American sociologist, in his book *Negroes in Brazil: A Study of Race Contact in Bahia*: class, not race, said Pierson, is the key to explaining Brazilian race relations. Essentially, it signifies that the prejudice and discrimination Blacks face in Brazil is mainly due to class, i.e. to different economic, social and cultural opportunities. In its Marxist version, this diagnosis says that capitalist exploitation is the main problem faced by Black people and that only a unified color-blind proletariat can overcome it. Almost everyone interviewed by Abdias and his fellows in 1946 expressed his view arguing against or in favor of one these two arguments, qualifying or disqualifying it. To say that class not race underscores inequality in Brazil is an idea full of nuances.

The mestizo nature of the Brazilian people is the third very central, timeless, idea in debates and political discourses of nationality and blackness in Brazil. It probably comes from the Independence days, I cannot give a unique exemplary writer that phrased it but we can cite it from von Martius in 1838, for example. In the Black milieu this idea took a turning point in the beginning of the XXth century when mulatto writers like Manoel Querino began to diffuse the idea that the genuine Brazilian type was the mulatto. Another important variation of this idea we found in the 1946 newspaper material we examined when Luis Lobato, a black professor in Rio the Janeiro, defines the Brazilian people as Black, something that Guerreiro Ramos, the Black sociologist and the 1950's activist, will fully develop in his *Introdução Crítica à Sociologia Brasileira*.

The next two ideas I would like to focus on are contemporary in the newspapers we analyzed: the idea of a Second Abolition that flourished in the Brazilian Black Front of São Paulo; and the appraisal of Black and African culture that emerged both from the cultural anthropologists of the 1940's and from the idea of French *negritude*. But we should also remember that African culture had already become of value to some forerunners among Brazilian anthropologists and folklorists, such as Nina Rodrigues and Manoel Querino.

The Second Abolition is both a diagnosis of the situation of Blacks in Brazil and a program of redress. It says in short that the abolition of slavery in 1888 left the ex-slaves

and Black people in general dispossessed of all protection both from their ex-Masters and from the State, and at the same token alienated them from the free labor market where European immigrants took their place. So dispossessed and alienated the black people fell in poverty, disease and immorality. The Second Abolition would be the moment of real redemption and integration of the Black people in the Brazilian nation, through education and moral restoration. Following Karin Kosling this idea appeared first among Paulista Black Integralistas before completely absorbing the imagination of Black protesters of the 1930's and 1940's.

As to the study and appraisal of the African heritage in Brazil, it began with the Bahian proto-anthropologist Nina Rodrigues, followed by Manoel Querino's studies of African costumes in Bahia, Edison Carneiro's studies on the Bahian candomblé and the interests of cultural anthropologists like Arthur Ramos, Melville Herskovits, and Roger Bastide on the African acculturation in Brazil. However, in parallel with anthropologists since the 1920's news from Europe alerted Black activists of São Paulo on the interests of European modernists in African Art and ancient African civilizations. Only in the aftermath of the Second World War did the idea of French *negritude* become a real source of influence on Brazilian Black intellectuals.

All the ideas I have just briefly mentioned reverberated intensely in the 40 interviews published in the *Diário Trabalhista*. They in fact form the raw material to an important transformation from 1946 onwards, when a new Black discourse on racial democracy takes form.

Before we turn to this point I shall rapidly mention the two more prominent discourses on Blackness at this time. The first one, very influential in Bahia and northern Brazil, amalgamated the idea of Brazilians as a *mullato* nation, the valorization of African heritage as popular Brazilian folklore, and the denial of race prejudice in Brazil. The second one, mainly developed by the Black movement in São Paulo, stressed the Second Abolition, the need of Blacks to get rid of their African backward practices and fashions; and to work out their own moral and cultural redress. The discourse on race prejudice was ambiguous: most of the time there was a denial of White racism and a stress on color prejudice nurtured by white and light skinned mestizos. In São Paulo a strong feeling of race identity was for the first time nourished by Blacks in Brazil.

How were these two ideological constellations supplanted in the 1940's? Let me begin by explicating the political context of the postwar in Brazil.

The Post-War Conjuncture in Brazil: Democracy after Vargas, the overthrow of fascism in Europe, and renewed racism in the USA

The political conjuncture of the post-war was of the valorization of democracy, but of intense dispute over its meanings and political institutions. A lot of intellectuals and activists went to prison under the Vargas regime, mainly communists and integralistas. It was in prison at Rio de Janeiro that Abdias do Nascimento, the editorialist of "Problems and Aspirations of Black Brazilians" met some communists and other white political militants that were important to the construction of the new democratic regime after 1945. Abdias was convicted by desertion after his involvement in a street fight with racial overtones at São Paulo in 1938. He had been also a *frente negrista* sympathizer and affiliated to the integralistas.

In the re-democratization conjuncture, Abdias, Camargo, Sebastião, Ironides and others who were very active in the Brazilian Black Front, as well as Francisco Lucrecio, Correia Leite, and many others, reorganized in order to influence the writing of the new democratic Constitution of 1946. Black political mobilization concentrated now both in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and not uniquely in São Paulo as before the Estado Novo. In 1944 Abdias installed his Experimental Black Theatre in Rio de Janeiro; in 1945 the same group constituted an *Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee* politically linked to the *Brazilian Student Union* (UNE) and the Communist Party to fight for political amnesty. The proximity with the Communists did not last more than six months. In the same year Black leaders of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro organized in São Paulo a *Black National Convention* gathering activists, politicians and intellectuals under the presidency of Abdias do Nascimento. In 1946 another Convention was held at Rio de Janeiro.

From these encounters a new basis for Black activism was planted which was delivered in six main demands to the National Constituent Assembly in a *Manifesto to the Brazilian Nation*. I will read its six main demands as they were put forward in the Manifesto:

“1. The constitution of our country shall be explicit in declaring the ethnic origins of the Brazilian people, as being constituted by three main races – the indigenous, the Black and the white;

2. Race and color prejudice shall be declared treason against the fatherland;

3. Common law shall declare race or color prejudice a crime when committed within private enterprises, civil societies, public or private institutions;

4. Schools at all educational levels shall be free. But while this goal is not accomplished the state shall guarantee fellowships for all Black students in all educational institutions, even the military ones;

5. All Brazilians who want to establish a commercial, industrial or agro- business with a capital inferior to 20 thousands cruzeiros shall pay no federal, state or municipal tax;

6 – The government shall take urgent actions in order to elevate the economic, social, and cultural standard of living of all Brazilians.”

What was new in Black political discourse in 1946?

Although the Second Abolition was in 1946 the key discourse of mobilization among Black activists, and even the creation of a Black Political Party was discussed, renewing the aspiration of the Black Front in 1937, some new ideas were developed in this conjuncture in relation to the nature of democracy and racial injustice. For many intellectuals North-American democracy was incomplete as long as blacks did not enjoy full and equal rights. What about the character of democracy for black people in Brazil? Pompilio da Hora, a black attorney graduated in Italy, gained some audience exposing the limited and truncated nature of democracy for black people in Brazil. For him, 75% of Brazilians were Black, but, said Da Hora:

“There are laws preaching equality, in the future other laws will be enacted by the Constituent Assembly, but they will be mostly inefficient since they depend on the subjectivity of the authorities that should apply them. (...) democracy for black people has been the right to clean the streets and to build the homes where they cannot afford to live.”

This radical critique of racial inequality, however, did not encounter a large audience beyond Black quarters. Perhaps because other intellectuals thought that if Blacks summed up 75% of all Brazilians, measures to combat this inequality should be less based on race or color and be more universalistic. The whole of white intellectuals and the majority of Blacks interviewed by Abdias and his fellows, although recognizing the right of “culturally advanced blacks” to protest and to form an autonomous movement, were contrary to any specific policy directed especially towards Blacks, and they were also contrary to the creation of a Black Party. In general, they favored the enactment by the Brazilian State of universal policies to improve and generalize public education and sanitation. All of them, however, strongly supported the cultural valorization of Afro-Brazilian culture.

Most of the time, Abdias and his fellows were on the defense, trying to convince public opinion that there was a real “problem of black people” in Brazil, a problem they were not creating from nothing. Three main points were regularly quoted as composing the “problem of Black people: First, the social and economic estrangement of black people after the Abolition of Slavery; second, color and racial prejudice, manifested in blatant discrimination in the commerce and in some state institutions as the Foreign Office and the Armed Forces; and third the feeling of inferiority of Blacks themselves (inferiority complex).

The remedies to the Problem would be first of all the mobilization of Black people themselves, as they made explicit in the Manifesto: “We are conscious of our value (...) What we are missing is the courage to use our force ourselves following our own orientation. We should be even more faithful to the fact that we shall be united at any cost, we shall be proud to be Black and accept the unique responsibility for our destiny, without accepting the patronizing or sponsorship of anybody.”

The other main component for the redress of the Black people in 1946 was cultural innovation. The idea of creating a Black erudite and popular culture, instead of treating Black culture as folklore or leaving it for anthropological studies was a main motivation both of the Black and of the Communist movements. As a cultural and protest movement, Abdias and his fellows, continued to gather at Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and

other Brazilian states the Black Experimental Theater, and the National Black Convention. Paired with them there were other important cultural initiatives such as the Afro-Brazilian Orchestra, of Abgail de Moura, and the Center for Afro-Brazilian Culture, of Solano Trindade. At the same time the black press was stimulated in São Paulo through the release of the new newspapers Alvorada and Senzala, and in Rio de Janeiro through the launching of the section “Problems and Aspirations of Brazilian Blacks” in *Diario Trabalhista*, that would three years later be transformed into the Black tabloid *Quilombo*.

Political strategies and alliances

To be represented in the political system, however, was a really huge task. The creation of a Black Party, for example, was equally opposed among their constituency and their white or Communist allies. The challenge was How to construct political alliances, being out of the political system, without accepting patronization?

After the rupture with the Communists who preferred a Popular Theater and a cultural movement of their own, aimed at the Brazilian people as a whole and not preferentially to Blacks, the strategy of Abdias and his fellows was to approach the Brazilian Labour Party (PTB) and its politicians. At first, they found in the white senator Hamilton Nogueira a patron. Nogueira was then called “the senator of the black people”. But by the end of 1946, Abdias was already able to create a Black Caucus into the PTB municipal assembly of Rio de Janeiro.

In ideological terms, all the movement efforts were concentrated in differentiating the situation of Blacks in Brazil from the USA in order to affirm a specific problem of racial prejudice in Brazil instead of denying it. It was not an easy task since science not political protest should decide on the true diagnosis. The Black movement did not count on prominent social scientists of their own. On the contrary Black leaders of the time did not even have an established position in society or at the universities. They were accountants, police superintendents, civil servants, students, in better circumstances they were lawyers. Against their claim of scientific knowledge there was the reputation of the sole sociological inquiry conducted in Brazil at the time by Donald Pierson, a man who kept his distance from the Brazilian Black movement. Pierson had been conclusive in his

study of race relations in Bahia: what could be taken for racial discrimination in Brazil was in fact class discrimination.

Abdias constructed, however, an important web of social relationships in the artistic, intellectual, and academic milieus involving key figures in 1946: people such as Rossine Camargo Guarnieri, Joaquim Ribeiro, Artur Ramos, Rômulo de Almeida, Gentil Punget, Thales de Azevedo, Herman Munoz Garrido, Ricardo Werneck de Aguiar. This circle would not stop growing until 1950, to include other intellectual eminences such as Gilberto Freyre, Roger Bastide, Nelson Rodrigues, etc.

Some of these men were of great value for the movement, using their scientific position to legitimate some key claims of the Black protesters, such as the existence of a problem of black people in Brazil, as did Arthur Ramos, in an interview in *Diario Trabalhista*, or on the existence of color discrimination in commerce, social clubs, etc. in Bahia, as did Thales de Azevedo. I quote this latter:

“Even if in practical terms, the words seem to make little difference, it is always necessary to distinguish with proper names what happens with men of color in Brazil and in other nations. Scientific method and historical and sociological accuracy force us to prefer to talk of “color discrimination” in Brazil instead of “racial prejudice” as it occurs when there is conspicuous racism.”

This scientific diagnosis was in fact made first by Franklin Frazier in 1942 (who differentiated race from color discrimination and asserted the widespread occurrence of the latter in Brazil’s race relations). Frazier’s and Thales’ interpretation represents an important step forward to Pierson’s simple denial of color prejudice, considered as being only a proxy for class prejudice, something from which socialists and liberals in the 1940’s made intense political and rhetorical use.

The need for the Black movement to counterpoise Pierson’s diagnosis was such that not only white scholars but almost 30 rank-and-file and professional blacks were mobilized by the section’s journalists to testify on the actuality of color prejudice in different regions of Brazil, and not only in São Paulo.

I do not need to stress the strong reaction against Black political mobilization coming from the conservative establishment. The daily newspaper *O Globo* for example did not even accept Black Experimental Theater. From liberals, socialists, and

communists the main resistance were against the creation of a Black Party or even Black caucuses in existent political parties; and the demand for public policies directed exclusively for Blacks, such as scholarships. To Communists and socialists the unity of the working class should not be fractured by color divisions.

Their arguments vary. Some of them argued that the racial situation in São Paulo, home of the Black leaders, could not be generalized to the rest of the country; some others held that color discrimination was limited to some few institutions; there were also those who suggested that the mestizo nature of Brazilian people did not permit race or color mobilization, while others argued that this type of mobilization would entail the formation of racial cysts in Brazil. As we have said before there were even those who did not accept the existence of a “problem of the black” separated from the “problem of the Brazilian people”.

Abdias do Nascimento and his fellows were however capable of forging a Black movement in the 1940s in alliance with white artists and intellectuals who gave them access both to party politics and to the national cultural scene. Black protest fought for the integration of Blacks in all corners of Brazilian life, advocating self-representation of Blacks in the political scene, and cultural and educational initiatives specially directed to the valorization of Afro-Brazilian and African heritage. It is worth mentioning the close relationship between the Black movement and imminent anthropologists and sociologists of the time who perhaps helped the Post-War movement to take off the puritan and petit-bourgeois moral overtones of the Brazilian Black Front.

The struggle against racial and color prejudice however continued to be the banner uniting Brazilians Blacks and the term “Negro” as well as was kept, although the name “Afro-Brazilian” to refer to both cultures and persons definitely entered the modern vocabulary of Black mobilization in Brazil. Political self-determination however was limited to cultural and educational initiatives and to the formation of a Black caucus among PTB representatives at the municipal assembly of Rio de Janeiro.

“Democracy” meaning equal rights and equal opportunities was in 1946 an ideal pursued by Blacks but did not come true. For a country just stepping out of Vargas’ dictatorship, in a world where fascism was just defeated but racism against Blacks in the USA had become even more visible, “democracy” had ambiguous meanings that both

liberals and communists wanted to clarify. The argument that the American democracy was imperfect and incomplete because of its racial bias had large currency among Brazilian intellectuals.

In conclusion, Black protest took place at the right place and at the right time but there was a real sound national consensus on racial harmony that led to the hope that racial justice would come true through the simple establishment of democratic rule. In the 1940s, far from being a white supremacist ideology, racial democracy was constructed by the tense collaboration between radical Black protesters and progressive white intellectuals as a utopian political ideal. By the end of the decade (to be precise in 1951) almost all demands of the Black Manifesto were partially granted with the promulgation of law Afonso Arinos punishing racial prejudice. But Black self-representation in politics as well as the understanding of democracy as full respect to individual and citizenship rights would have to wait half-a-century to be feasible. In order to democracy come true “racial democracy” had to be denounced first as illusion and myth.